



UNIVERSITY OF  
FLORIDA

# IFAS EXTENSION

**Friday's Feature**

**By**

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## **Avoid the urge to do major pruning in the fall**

As the weather cools in the fall, many of us emerge from the air conditioning and begin looking around the landscape again. One thing we may see is that some plants grew a lot over the summer and have gotten somewhat out of bounds. There is often a strong temptation to get out the pruning saw and start fighting back the jungle.

In gardening, timing is everything. Knowing when and when not to perform tasks is very important. Fall is actually the worst time of year to heavily prune most plants.

Many shrubs such as hollies, azaleas and crape myrtles are in the process of entering a dormant stage. It's important to let them stop growing and rest.

With mild autumn temperatures, heavy pruning can stimulate a flush of new growth. This late in the year, there simply is not enough time for that lush, tender growth to harden off and mature before winter freezes begin to arrive in late November or early December. The last thing that a gardener wants is a flush of tender growth going into winter.

While some winters are relatively mild, others will bring some very cold temperatures. Along the Gulf Coast, temperatures tend to bounce around in winter. It is not unusual to have several days of 70 degree temperatures followed by a quick drop into the teens. Obviously, fall pruned plants that were stimulated by warm temperatures to put forth new, succulent growth would be very susceptible to damage and even death when temperatures suddenly drop.

Be sure to prune shrubs at the appropriate time. Because shrubs vary in when they flower and therefore when they should be pruned, divide them into two categories - spring flowering and summer flowering.

The spring flowering shrubs such as azalea, camellia and spiraea have already set their flower buds for next year's flowers. Heavy pruning now will remove most of their flowers and diminish your spring display. Spring flowering shrubs should not be pruned until after the flowering season is over. All major pruning should be finished by June, so that these early flowering shrubs will have time to regrow and form flower buds for the following spring.

Summer flowering plants are just the opposite. They bloom on current season's wood, or new growth. Crape myrtle, althea, roses and hibiscus fit into this category. These plants should receive any major pruning during the late dormant season. In our area, this means late February or early March.

Some pruning can be done anytime. It's perfectly fine to remove diseased, dead, decayed or damaged branches any time of the year and especially in fall, when allowing diseased parts to linger on a plant over the winter could just bring on headaches the next spring.

Light pruning, removing less than about ten percent of the foliage, can also be performed safely on most species at any time. Just be sure not to get carried away and end up pruning more than you planned.

So, if you want your trees and shrubs to have the best chance of surviving the winter, don't do any major pruning in the fall.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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